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ABSTRACT

To examine the nature of sex differences in children's speech during play, 10 boys and 10 girls in kindergarten were videotaped continuously during 10 minute dyadic play sessions involving non-sex-typed toys. Each child participated twice -- once with a same-sex peer and once with an opposite-sex peer. The videotapes were coded according to whom each child directed his/her verbalizations (self or other), and the content of each child's verbalizations (self, toy, self and toy, play partner, play partner and toy, previous experience, toy noises, mutterings, and comments unrelated to the toy play activities). No sex differences were found. It was found, however, that children talked more to others than to themselves except when making noises related to the toy or its function. The most common type of verbalization was irrelevant to play activity. The second most frequent type was about the toy itself and occurred more in dialogues. Children generally talked more when with the opposite-sex peer. Mutterings were more common in same-sex play, but all other categories occurred more frequently when playing with an opposite-sex playmate. It is concluded that (1) children may show sex differences only when the toys and activities introduced into the research setting are sex-typed, and (2) due to unfamiliarity, children playing in opposite-sex dyads may need to give each other various kinds of instruction. (Author/RH)

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Listening to boys and girls during play *

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American children spend a great deal of time each day in play activities. Sometimes they play alone in what is called solitary play while othertimes, especially as they reach the kindergarten period, they play with others. Researchers and theorists alike have long acknowledged the development of play and peer relations as hallmarks of early socialization. Through play the child learns about the environment, develops role orientations and develops cognitively. Included in this last area is language development. The more complex the type of play activity, the more central is the usage of language. In order to play cooperatively, children must be able to communicate the rules of the game to one another. Some children receive this experience of talking during play early while others do not enter into interactive play until they are in kindergarten.

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For over 50 years, investigators have described stages of play as well as sex differences in play choices and toy preferences. Boys and girls are usually relegated to different parts of the preschool classroom and usually found on different equipment in the school playground. In earlier research in our lab (Liss, in press) we found that not only do children prefer to play with different types of toys, but even when playing with the same activity their style of play is different. In that study many differences were found between boys and girls in their play styles. One area we examined was verbalizations.

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Observers coded boys and girls' play behavior on several dimensions and their ratings determined that boys talked more than girls. This was puzzling since at the kindergarten level girls, at least according to the communication literature, are expected to be more verbal and sociable. The present study sought to examine this perplexing finding more closely, determining the nature of children's play-related speech.

Our subjects were 2 white middle class kindergarten children, half boys and half girls. Children participated twice. Once the child came to the play area with a same-sex peer and once with an opposite-sex peer. Teachers determined the composition of the pairs but were careful to avoid pairing best friends or enemies. An unoccupied room at the local elementary school was set up as a play room for the study. A group of eight toys were available for the subjects and were placed in a central location in the room. All toys were nonsex-typed based on previous literature findings and estimates of sex-typing in the kindergarten classroom as noted by the observers. These included such things as playing cards, toy cash registers, telephone, musical instruments. To facilitate unobtrusive coding the subjects were videotaped during play. The continuous recording method was therefore possible and was chosen over time sampling methods on-site.

Subjects were left alone to play for ten minutes after which they were allowed to see themselves on television, a big inducement for young subjects! Following collection of the videotapes, the researchers coded the tapes at the college psychology laboratory. Several coding systems were used and interobserver reliability of .80 was required before choosing final categories.

At first we attempted to code every word in terms of content but with so many children and so many minutes there were surprisingly few overlapping comments. We then tried to code the type of speech or sentence structure such as question or statement or interjection as had been done in observations of older children's classroom verbalizations; but alas, 95% of all comments were just that...comments and not questions. Our most successful coding system is the one I will describe to you now.

In the final coding system we examined two major dimensions: a) to whom was the child directing verbalizations (called speech recipient and coded as self or other); and b) the content of the child's verbalizations (called speech content). The first dimension noted whether the child's comments were directed towards himself/herself or toward the play partner - determination of monologue (egocentric) or dialogue (communication) speech. This dimension was coded using both the auditory/verbal comments heard by the observers as well as the child's stance and facial expression (i.e., physical signs directing the speech).

The second variable referred to content of the comment. This variable was divided into nine separate categories as follows: 1) self: a comment about the subject such as "My name is _____" or "I'm hungry"; 2) toy: a comment about the toy itself such as "This is a great toy" or "I don't like pianos"; 3) self and toy: comments joining 1 + 2 such as intent to play with a particular toy; 4) play

partner; comments about the playmate but not involving the playmate's toy such as "Are you happy?" or "Do you like me?"; 5) play partner and toy: a combination of 2 + 4 referring to the playmate's play behavior; 6) previous experience: subject's indication of prior knowledge or possession of a similar toy at home; 7) toy noises: imitation of the toy's properties or singing along with the musical instrument; 8) mutterings: a category referring to inaudible or otherwise uncodable comments by the subject; and 9) irrelevant: comments in no way related to the toy play activity or specific to the subject's state such as "The walls are green."

Our initial questions were based on the issue of sex differences in play and verbalizations during play and so our initial analyses focused on this variable. Well, what did we find? At first we thought we had no results, but in the particular case a lack of significance was significant. First, let me state that there were no sex difference on any of the measures....NONE. This says two things about earlier work. First, it provides additional evidence to refute the myth that girls are more verbal than boys. When we carefully measure verbalizations there were no differences or, at least no differences at this age with nonsex-typed toys. Of course, this may reflect differences in methodologies but is consistent with the second implication: In terms of the earlier work we did, we may have stumbled upon another instance of the 'eye of the beholder.' Following upon Condry and Condry's work regarding sex typing of children's behavior, it is possible

that the earlier rating system allowed observers to imply what they thought was happening based on their own biases, rather than objective carefully measured observations. A last factor also is the question of sex-typing and its effects. In the present study children played with nonsex-typed toys and no differences in speech occurred - however the earlier work focused on sex-typed and nonsextyped toys. It is quite possible that children show sex differences only when the toys and activities are sex-typed themselves. This is quite a positive note regarding children's adaptability and the flexibility of speech and play in the early years. The sex differences found in other studies may certainly be a function of the materials used and not related to inherent sex differences in children!

However, now let me concentrate on some other aspects of the data - what exactly did they talk about during play? There was a highly significant finding that children talked more to others than to themselves except when making noises related to the toy or its function. In this latter situation children, rather logically, talked or sang to themselves. Our subjects generally, though, talked with others in dialogue rather than monologue fashion. This supports general theories of play which indicate that by the kindergarten years children are engaging in cooperative rather than solitary play behavior.

The most common type of verbalization was irrelevant to play activity. The children made comments about the teachers, lunch menu and so forth - quite interesting but not related to the toy activities. In fact about 25% of all comments were classified as irrelevant.

The second most common comment type was about the toy itself and occurred more when talking to the partner than to oneself. Comments toward the play partner about the partner's behavior with the toy were also quite frequent. This may be related to didactic comments on instruction with the toy.

The last type of comparison reveals some unusual results. The last view compared frequency of same-sex versus opposite-sex peer comments. Children generally talked more when with the... opposite-sex peer. Females especially talked very little to themselves in opposite-sex play and directed most of their remarks to the partner. Mutterings were more common in same-sex play (as were the previously mentioned toy noises) but all other categories occurred more frequently when playing with an opposite-sex playmate. This was especially true of the categories of prior experience and toy along with self and other statements- While this appears at first to be a little confusing it may be clearer when we notice that many of the comments were forms of instruction - i.e., the boy who showed the girl playmate what to do with the cash register. Indeed children may feel pressured into talking to the other child rather than with the other child when they are of opposite-sexes. The origin of this perplexing situation will give us some further avenues to follow. In fact, we are now in the process of looking at the sequences of speech - what responses children gave to both same-sex and opposite-sex playmates. It may well be that when same-sex peers play they know how to play similarly and do not have to discuss their actions but when the playmate is an opposite-sex peer they must compare and correct one another's actions. An intriguing idea which will be interesting to talk

(no pun intended) about in the future. A parallel for this notion is readily available from adult anecdotal conversations. Often cross-sex pairs attempt conversations to bridge the gap in their methods of interactions.

At least we can say that the children's conversations or speech during play were more sophisticated than generally believed. Children, like grownups, can do two things at once -- they can play and they can talk. And when they play and talk they can be busy in one activity and converse about something totally different. The children in this study showed us that they were indeed adept at interactions and speaking with one another. Play, indeed, is more than just children's stuff. The cognitive components used in play are quite active in the verbal mode!

Detailed analyses and additional comments are available from the senior author.